Cuba, Mexico: Who's Co-Opting Whom?

By Jack Hood Vaughn

Since his undisciplined and experimental years of the early '60s, when he was spending millions and killing hundreds in a failed frontal assault on the government of Venezuela's Romulo Betancourt, Fidel Castro gradually has fashioned a more subtle strategy for conquest. His technique might be termed diplomatic puppetry: the creative exploitation of surrogate states and the co-opting of their leadership for both active and passive support.

Mr. Castro's clients range from the world federation of non-aligned nations—fully 90 percent of which are at least passively aligned with Cuba—to Mexico and Nicaragua, where being pro-Cuban controls most other foreign-policy considerations. Fidel has mastered the art of positioning himself in such a way that plaudits normally reserved for revolutionary heroes and liberators go to him. Blame for fanning the flames of insurgency has a way of being deflected to his hostages and surrogates. Even in those instances where Cuban troops have participated directly, such as Angola and Ethiopia, Fidel seems to come off more as guru or godfather than as the Soviet Union's imperialistic stooge.

With stunning success, Mr. Castro has been able consistently to push the bad guy image onto others doing his or Moscow's bidding, e.g., to the PLO, East Germany, Syria, Libya and Nicaragua. In orchestrating his Overture to the Left in recent years, he has known how to divert world attention from conductor to stage hand. The music may be Russian, but under Mr. Castro's baton it sounds to the Latins like the composer could have been Bo'var.

Fish or Cut Bait

A more recent refinement in the Castro approach to subversion requires his would-be collaborators to fish or cut bait. Some four or five years ago, Fidel started to put disparate communist groups within most Latin American countries on notice that further help from Cuba would be contingent on cessation of intramural squabbling. In country after country, Castro's dictate has brought at least temporary unification, with consequent improved utilization of Cuban inputs—especially in El Salvador. It is widely known, for example, that last December Mr. Castro invited the leadership of the various communist splinter groups in Honduras to Havana. After having agreed to Mr. Castro's quid pro quo for increased assistance, they proceeded to elect the hardest-line Marxist among them to be their leader.

It was only after numerous ill-fated attempts at establishing an advance base in the Western Hemisphere (Venezuela, Bolivia, Panama, Colombia, Guatemala), that Mr. Castro's big break finally came with the fall of Somoza. When half a dozen countries, led by Panama and Costa Rica, turned to Mr. Castro for last-resort help in shoring up the faltering Sandinista forces, the great leap forward became possible. Elite Cuban training cadres, invited to Costa Rica, impressively whipped the Sandinistas into shape. In short order, the Somoza National Guard was in final retreat. (The late Panamanian strongman, General Omar Torrijos, once told me that Cuba's special military training forces made U.S. Green Berets look like Cub Scouts in terms of political sophistication, experience, overall skills and professionalism. He also confessed that the worst political mistake of his career had been brokering the use of Cubans to depose Somoza.)

The few hundred Cuban troops who turned the Sandinistas around have since been joined by thousands of the same kind. But with training of the expanded Nicaraguan army nearing completion, they have turned their attention increasingly to training Central American irregulars sent from neighboring countries to prepare for future insurgencies, and to finish the job in El Salvador.

As the original sponsor of Mr. Castro a quarter of a century ago, Mexico has been in certain ways even more creative in meeting his and its own policy needs than has the Soviet Union. If the Soviets have been bankroller and hardware store for Cuba's foreign ventures and home fortification, Mexico's role has been both broader and less threatening. From those desperately needed American spare parts in the early years, to preferential trade, transportation, communications, diplomatic and propaganda support, Mexico has been Cuba's most effective Western ally by far.

As the drama plays out, it will be interesting to monitor Mexican reaction if and when the Sandinista forces take on Guatemala, and the fire moves next door.

One need go no further than to review existing treaties and protocols between Cuba and Mexico to comprehend the scope and depth of their interdependence. At latest count there were 27 major formal agreements between them. As a senior Mexican diplomat once confided in me, "We believe that our brotherly ties with Cuba represent the only real diplomatic leverage we Mexicans would have against you gringos in a showdown."

It is clear that Mexico's foreign policy equalizer against the U.S. has been its unwavering and aggressively supportive policy toward Cuba. Had there been any doubt about Mexico's policy before, the administration of President Lopez Portillo repeatedly set the record straight. Under Mr. Lopez, the foreign office leader of the pro-Castro cult was Minister Jorge Castaneda. His recent appointment as Mexican ambassador to France casts some doubt on how useful—from the U.S point of view at least—ongoing Franco-Mexican initiatives to mediate the Central American crisis will actually be.

In spite of the apparent recent warming of U.S.-Mexican relations, growing out of the U.S.-engineered bailout of Mexico's treasury, it would be surprising if new President de la Madrid felt the need to take his country's Cuban policy off automatic. Yet he has been quoted that this might be considered when the U.S. became a little less rigid in the way *it* views Mr. Castro. (Possibly he meant when the U.S. became a little more forthcoming in the way it deals with Mexican problems.)

The Last Domino to Fall

Mexican leaders have been convinced for decades that the only way to cope with foreign communists and lesser radicals is in the very same way they have successfully handled them at home. They co-opt them, buy them off, make them dependent, convert them into bureaucrats, smother them. Previous Mexican administrations have also found it remarkably effective in the tranquilization of the vociferous Mexican left to flaunt, or overdo just a bit, their now traditional pro-Castro gestures. In the currently fragile political climate of Mexico, the odds are heavily against President de la Madrid risking a change in policy if it in any way implied challenging or neutralizing Mr. Castro. Certainly Mr. de la Madrid showed no give at all on this score in recent meetings with Secretary of State Shultz.

Yet if one believes, as I do, that the ultimate threat in Central America is less home-grown insurgents than it is massive Cuban involvement, then Mexico, in the last analysis, stands to be either a key to blunting Mr. Castro's gaining offensive, or the last domino to fall.

Mr. Castro's fifth column in Mexico will probably continue to abet the Cuban cause as fully as it has in the past as facilitator, apologist and down-field blocker for Cuban operations in the hemisphere. Chances seem to be growing (especially in view of the infighting and indecision clouding current U.S. policy making) that the roll Mr. Castro is on in Central America will continue to accelerate.

As the drama plays out, it will be interesting to monitor Mexican reaction if and when the Sandinista forces take on Guatemala, and the fire moves next door. At that point the Mexicans would at last be forced to evaluate seriously who has co-opted whom, and whether being the devil's advocate against Uncle Sam does have its practical (and territorial) limits.

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